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SUBJECT: OEF MANDATE RENEWAL BURDENED BY GERMAN TROOPS'
ACTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Pol Min/Couns John Bauman. Reason: 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. A series of incidents involving German forces overseas will burden November's debate on renewal of the mandate for German troops in OEF, though at this stage the Chancellery and Foreign Office are confident the mandate will be approved. Most recently, photographs of German soldiers in Afghanistan mishandling skulls have re-energized the debate over whether German overseas deployments, especially in Afghanistan, are morally or politically appropriate for Germany. End Summary.

12. (U) In the week of October 23, German media published photos of German troops in Afghanistan mishandling human remains - standing in sometimes obscene poses with skulls and using them as hood ornaments. The photos, reportedly taken in 2003, have provoked extensive media commentary ranging from psychological analysis of the stress on soldiers to outrage about such activities. A main theme of discussion has been that this misconduct increases the threat to the soldiers themselves and to Germany as a whole. While not explicitly invoked, the skull imagery, dating from 2001-2004, may also awaken memories of Nazi-era war crimes committed by the SS (which had a "Skull" Division). Chancellor Merkel, Defense Minister Jung, and other senior officials have condemned the acts and moved quickly to take disciplinary action against the soldiers and former soldiers -- four of the six soldiers allegedly involved in one incident have reportedly already left the military and the remaining two were suspended from service by Defense Minister Jung.

13. (C) Berlin fears the photos could be instrumentalized in Muslim countries to provoke anti-German actions. Chancellery contacts told us October 27 that they were glad there had been no international backlash in the immediate aftermath of the reports but thought Friday religious services in some Muslim countries could stir up attention.

14. (U) Several other incidents, while not directly related to the Afghanistan deployment, have sullied the domestic image of Germany's overseas military engagement. Since his return to Germany in late August, former Guantanamo detainee Murat Kurnaz has alleged physical mistreatment by German Special Forces (KSK) while he was held in Kandahar in 2002. The Bundestag Defense Committee decided this week to investigate the actions of German forces in Afghanistan in relation to Kurnaz. The lack of an unequivocal government response to the allegations has fueled criticism of Germany's engagement in the war on terror.

15. (U) Likewise, leaked information suggesting that the German government failed somehow to intervene on behalf of

alleged detainee Khaled El Masri has also cast doubt on the government's truthfulness -- especially vis-a-vis parliament.

Both the Kurnaz and El Masri cases are among the subjects of an ongoing investigation into German activities in the war on terror by a special parliamentary committee. In addition, in the past week, information has surfaced to suggest that the government was either unaware of or misled parliament about the extent of restrictions on the interdiction operations of German naval units off the Lebanese coast participating in UNIFIL (Septel).

16. (C) These incidents have given ammunition to the opposition parties in parliament which have been critical of Germany's overseas engagements. The Left Party.PDS predictably has been strengthened in its opposition to any overseas deployments. Greens have strongly condemned the mishandling of skeletons and any alleged abuses by soldiers, but have not thus far suggested withdrawing from any deployments. The Free Democrats have not suggested withdrawing from Afghanistan, but have jumped on the confusion over the UNIFIL mandate to reiterate their opposition to that deployment. Chancellery contacts have told us they have no fears the OEF mandate would fail to be renewed. A CDU contact has told us the party remains solidly united behind the Afghanistan and other German deployments. The SDP, too, continues to support these. However, some SDP voices have raised questions about the management of the deployment.

17. (U) At this stage, there is no reason to think that the OEF mandate will be rejected, but we expect these issues and the questions they raise to remain alive and prominent in the weeks before the decision is taken. The new allegations and photos complicate the atmosphere as the Merkel government seeks to move forward.

TIMKEN JR